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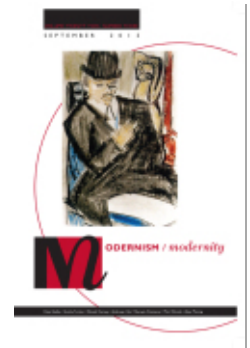
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Decadence Revisited: Evelyn Waugh and the Afterlife of the 1890s

Alex Murray

The young Evelyn Waugh's first encounter with decadence came via his elder brother, Alec, in 1916: "He had a particular relish at that time for the English lyric poets of the nineties; their dying cadences were always the prelude to his departure."¹ Around the same time, Evelyn marked approvingly the lyrics of Oscar Wilde, Ernest Dowson, and Richard Le Gallienne in his copy of *The Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* (1912).² This early encounter with the 1890s inaugurated a lifelong relationship that was marked by both influence and antagonism. The shifts and changes in Waugh's position on the literature of decadence offer a salutary reminder that the relationship between modernism and its literary forebears is never simple or stable.

Much scholarship on Waugh's work tends to flatten out his attitude, reducing it to either an endorsement or a rejection of the nineties. For instance, Jonathan Greenberg suggests that Waugh shares with Wilde an "aggressively antisentimental" view of Victorian sentiment.³ Christine Berberich, on the other hand, has suggested that Waugh and his contemporaries at Oxford "rediscovered the dandies and aesthetes of the late nineteenth century, the likes of Wilde, Beerbohm and Firbank: writers who had been exposed to ridicule by their grandfathers and fathers."⁴ Andrew Eastham, alternatively, has recently demonstrated the extent to which an engagement with Paterian aesthetics potentially underpins *Brideshead Revisited*. For Eastham, Waugh's novel demonstrates the limits of aestheticism, mapped in the intricacies of style.⁵ In all three instances, the scholars focus on

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594 one period of Waugh's work and one of his responses to the literature of the 1890s rather than providing an overall picture of how that relationship shifted and developed. The cumulative effect can be to paint Waugh as a neodecadent in a way that smooths over the complexities of literary history. This is a tendency most notably developed by Martin Green, who attempts to paint the whole of Waugh's circle as a continuation of decadence.⁶ Simon Joyce, who details Waugh's engagement with the Victorians from *Decline and Fall* (1928) to *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), offers a more nuanced approach, yet in identifying Waugh as part of the "schizophrenic incoherence of conservative modernism" he misses some of the subtlety of Waugh's engagement with the legacies of the 1890s, particularly Firbank.⁷

In this article I outline the relationship between Waugh and the 1890s as part of the broader problem of charting the afterlives of decadence. There is a growing body of work on the reception of decadent writers, much of which has focused on Wilde.⁸ Waugh's response was idiosyncratic, but it also reflected broader cultural currents: he was drawn to the modish neodecadence of Ronald Firbank in the early 1920s and then satirized and dismissed the increasing popularity of Wilde in the late 1920s, before developing a fond, even nostalgic attitude towards 1890s aestheticism in *Put Out More Flags* (1942) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). These shifts reflect the broader cultural climate of the first half of the twentieth century, during which writers, artists, and critics went from rejecting to embracing the 1890s, producing a history that can help us to understand the ways in which we read decadence today. Decadence is, despite the best historicist attempts to frame it otherwise, still a twentieth-century construction. It was writers like Waugh, as well the earlier generation of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, who were responsible for the image of an affected, effeminate decadence that still characterizes popular representations. As the case of Waugh reveals, however, this was not a simple rejection of the 1890s but a continual revisiting, the period becoming an index of Waugh's shifting relationship to ideas of literary fashion and artistic beauty. In particular, I want to suggest that Waugh's relationship to decadence reflected the nostalgia for the 1890s that emerged at the beginning of World War I, before decadence emerged as safely "historical" around World War II, no longer signifying modernity or a transgression of traditional cultural values. Waugh himself, as I detail, rejected literary periodization as inherently reductive, and a detailed engagement with his changeable attitude toward decadence compels us to remain vigilant against any too easy model of the relationship between modernism and the literature of the 1890s.

Decadent Nostalgia

As many have observed, the critical blueprint for reading decadence in the twentieth century was provided by early modernism.⁹ For the emerging modernist writers of the period, particularly Pound and Eliot, the nineties offered good fodder for satire but also unleashed various anxieties of influence as they sought to distance themselves from the formal impasses of decadent verse. Decadence, of course, didn't have to wait until the

advent of modernism to be subject to satire and parody; from the 1880s onward the aestheticism of Wilde and others was lampooned in various *Punch* cartoons and, most famously, in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* (1881). The 1890s saw the emergence of decadent satires of decadence, including Lionel Johnson's "The Cultured Faun" (1891), John Davidson's *Earl Lavender* (1895), Gelett Burgess's *Le Petit Journal des Refusées* (1896), and Max Beerbohm's "Enoch Soames" (1916). The ideological stakes of comic dismissals such as those of *Punch* are clear, while the decadent parodies of Johnson and others knowingly derive humor from the similarities between themselves and their intended targets. Something altogether more complex in both form and objective is at work in modernist satire and disavowal of decadence. Pound, like Eliot, was struggling with the problem of how to move beyond Swinburne, and several of Pound's early verses dramatize this attempt to leave lyric eroticism and ennui behind. Some of these poems fail miserably and would make even the most conservative reader glad of the *Cantos*.¹⁰ The simultaneous attraction and repulsion to the 1890s yielded Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) and Eliot's *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917). While these works very clearly mark a distance in form from the world of the 1890s, both poets name-check decadent writers and themes in these breakthrough works, signaling their self-conscious attempt to sever themselves from the *fin de siècle*.

It is not surprising that Eliot and Pound's aggressive rejection of the 1890s has come to dominate our understanding of the relationship between decadence and the literature of the twentieth century. Even when we look beyond their dismissals, we are still inclined toward a developmental narrative that, as Marion Thain has argued, only ever identifies aestheticism and decadence as a step toward something new. For Thain the awkward modernist homage in T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Practice of Poetry," a lecture that he delivered in Dublin in 1936 but that was not published until 1985, paints this relationship in a very different light ("Modernist 'Homage' to the 'Fin de siècle,'" 26). In this lecture, Eliot suggests that decadence, had it continued, could have exhausted the energies of French symbolism, and his own work might never have come about, or at least might have lacked significance. As Ronald Bush has shown, Eliot's lecture demonstrates how much the 1890s meant to him—his dismissal elsewhere was itself an unconscious declaration of respect.¹¹

Alongside derision and homage, there was a third attitude toward decadence in the early twentieth century: nostalgia. Even those who worked to denigrate the literary developments of the period ended up romanticizing it and demonstrating nostalgia for it. Ezra Pound, for instance, was fascinated by the living traces of the Rhymers' Club and sought out such figures as Victor Plarr to hear firsthand the stories of the period. Plarr, by this point, was working as a librarian at the Royal College of Surgeons, but he was only too happy to reminisce for Pound. These conversations, Ian Fletcher suggests, were recorded by Plarr in "To My Old Friend, July 1, '14," a poem that captures the fond nostalgia that artists were beginning to feel for decadence and the 1890s. Pound also recorded elements of these conversations in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*:

Wilde we knew well. We Beardsley saw,
 And duly damned the early Shaw.
 But now as wraiths and conquered souls
 These vanish. Their forgotten roles
 Are grown pathetic. We survive
 As fathers, very much alive,
 But oft inclined to drop a tear
 On Fancy's old romantic bier.
 . . .
 Both you and I — tho' you're so new —
 Regret that Past, now out of view,
 And sometimes wish we could revive
 The days of Eighteen-Ninety-Five!¹²

The tears dropped by Plarr and others were largely parodic, as nostalgia often is. The self-reflexive impossibility of the desire to revive 1895 served to distance decadence, to place it far more firmly in the past than it in fact was. It is most certainly only coincidence that the poem is dated some three days after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, an event that would lead to World War I. The desire that Plarr identified in Pound to revive the 1890s seemed ludicrous, given the jarring juxtaposition between the two periods; in a time of total war the drama of the “naughty nineties” seemed trivial. As A. J. A. Symons, the great chronicler of decadence, put it in 1928:

Freed from the restrictions and hypocrisies against which they strove, we are irked by the despairing clamour of their revolt; exhausted by the greatest war in history, we are in no mood for merely introspective woe; absorbed in our own time we forget the problems by which these young men were perturbed. In the twilit end of the nineteenth century there seemed no answer to a bleak materialism.¹³

If the nineties were out of time during and after the Great War, that distance could be measured in the slew of memoirs and studies that emerged, including: William Garden Blaikie Murdoch's *The Renaissance of the Nineties* (1911), Holbrook Jackson's *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (1914), Elizabeth Robins Pennell's *Nights: Rome and Venice in the Aesthetic Eighties; London and Paris in the Fighting Nineties* (1916), Bernard Muddimen's *The Men of the Nineties* (1920), W. B. Yeats's *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922), Osbert Burdett's *The Beardsley Period* (1925), and Richard Le Gallienne's *The Romantic '90s* (1925). These books were accompanied by an increasing number of biographies and studies of Oscar Wilde following the publication of his *Complete Works* in 1908 and the ensuing libel suit that Lord Alfred Douglas brought, most notably Arthur Ransome's *Oscar Wilde: a Critical Study* (1912) and Frank Harris's fantastical *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions* (1916). The steady stream of controversies, some truly bizarre, along with the efforts of Robert Ross, Wilde's literary executor, meant that Wilde's life and works circulated routinely in both literary and general publications.¹⁴ It is within this initial critical revaluation of the 1890s that I would like to locate Waugh's response to

decadence, which was a complicated reaction to contemporary attempts to nostalgically recall and celebrate the literature of the fin de siècle.

Ronald Firbank and the Neodecadence of the 1920s

Waugh's first mature engagement with the 1890s after his school days was not with Wilde or the "tragic generation" of the 1890s but the dynamic, baroque literary style of Ronald Firbank. It is important to understand Firbank's place in the literary culture of the period in order to grasp both the nature and political aspect of Waugh's support for him. Firbank sits uncomfortably in the broad narratives of literary history. Born in 1886, he encountered literary decadence as a child and then again as an undergraduate at Cambridge, where he studied until 1909, leaving without taking a degree. He was a friend of Wilde's son, Vyvyan Holland, and the two hosted in May 1909 an infamous luncheon in Holland's rooms for Robert Ross, one of the other guests being Rupert Brooke. Firbank's passion for the nineties was insatiable, and Holland recalled Firbank asking him to introduce him to Ada Levenson, "the Sphinx' upon whom all the stars of the period had glittered, however wanly."¹⁵ It was only some ten or fifteen years after the Wilde trial that decadence could emerge as the locus of nostalgic longing by a younger generation of artists. As Carl Van Vechten wrote of Firbank: "To be 1890 in 1890 might be considered almost normal. To be 1890 in 1922 might be considered almost queer. There is a difference, however. The colour is magenta. Oscar's hue was green. The fun is warmer."¹⁶ The lightness of Firbank's work, its flippancy and foppiness, was out of time, but it was, for Van Vechten at least, an updating of decadent style for a new era. Firbank was, Van Vechten claimed, "Aubrey Beardsley in a Rolls Royce." Evelyn Waugh's early interest in decadence was with this new, lighter, less sentimental expression of art for art's sake rather than with the period of the *Yellow Book* or *The Green Carnation*.

Toward the end of his life in 1962, Waugh was asked to review a collection of posthumously published Ronald Firbank odds and ends entitled *The New Rhythm and Other Pieces*. He responded wearily, "Your kind invitation . . . reaches me thirty years too late. In youth I was fascinated by Firbank, now I can't abide him."¹⁷ This concession of youthful fascination is in many ways misleading, as Firbank's style was crucial to Waugh's early work. *Decline and Fall* (1928) and *Vile Bodies* (1930) and in particular the early story "The Balance" (1926) evince a heavy Firbankian imprint, a lightness and structural humor that make their social comedy so much more frenetic and fast-paced than, for instance, Wilde's plays. Many reviewers have noted Waugh's indebtedness to Firbank, including Brigid Brophy, who described him as "a fiercer Firbank," and V. S. Pritchett, for whom he was "the heir of Firbank's slashing grace."¹⁸ These reviews were both published in the 1960s, by which time Waugh had categorically rejected Firbank, yet in an essay on Firbank published in *Life and Letters* in 1929, Waugh places his allegiance very firmly with Firbank and against Wilde:

His raw material, allowing for the inevitable changes of fashion, is almost identical with Oscar Wilde's—the lives of rich, slightly decadent people seen against a background of traditional culture, grand opera, the picture galleries, and the Court; but Wilde was at heart radically sentimental. His wit is ornamental; Firbank's is structural. Wilde is rococo; Firbank is baroque. It is very rarely that Firbank “makes a joke.”¹⁹

The distinction Waugh draws between rococo and baroque is essential, if somewhat confusing. First, rococo followed the baroque, marking an increase in excess. Waugh is clearly not then trying to suggest that Wilde and Firbank should be read in a developmental fashion. Instead he is trying to pinpoint the ways in which Firbank's comedy comes from within the text, rather than from without. Whereas Wilde's wit was the aphorism, the bon mot, that could survive perfectly when removed from the original work, Firbank's humor only made sense within the context of the work itself. As Carl Van Vechten notes, it was pointless to quote Firbank: “Quotations would serve no purpose—can one quote from a tapestry?” (*Excavations*, 173).

So how does the trace of Firbank's baroque comedy reveal itself in Waugh's work?

Brophy suggests a scene that would qualify as baroque in *A Handful of Dust* (1934): Lady Brenda Last, on being told that “John” has died in a terrible accident is certain it is the lover with whom she is having an affair, only to find out it is her son (they share the same name). It is a moment that, as Brophy points out, is in no way sentimental, belonging instead to “the moving and nauseating depths of bad taste” (“Mr. Waugh's Eschatology,” 450). The humor here only makes sense in the context of the novel and the character relations therein. But, and here Brophy notes Waugh's distance from Firbank, it is meant to have strictly moral effects, whereas Firbank's humor is unable to condemn and judge—it is never satire. Brophy is right to identify this as an example of baroque humour, but arguably *A Handful of Dust* marks a turn in Waugh's fiction, as with its publication he became a moralizing critic of his own time rather than a detached, satirical observer.

It may stand as a useful way of distinguishing Firbankian decadence from that of Wilde by echoing Arthur Symonds's description in the preface to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) of decadence as a “perversity of form and matter” and “half a mock interlude” before symbolism arrived, at which point art returned “to the one pathway, leading through beautiful things to the eternal beauty.”²⁰ Firbank can then be read as a decadent symbolist, someone for whom the structural harmony of the whole is more significant than the fragmentation of the phrase or sentence. We could here recall Paul Bourget, for whom a “decadent style is one in which the unity of the book falls apart, replaced by the independence of the page, where the page decomposes to make way for the independence of the sentence, and the sentence makes way for the word.”²¹ There is no falling away in Firbank's work but an accretion, a building up through rhythm, allusion, and irony. This account of Firbankian decadence provides us with a means of thinking about the ways in which humor functions in Waugh's work. The most infamous example of Firbankian structural humor in Waugh's early work is the start of *Vile Bodies*. Waugh claimed in a 1962 interview with Julian Jebb that he “cribbed much of the scene at the customs from Firbank.”²² In it there are snippets

of conversation, speakers not identified, language too ornate to be realistic, and little division between the tone of the narrative and those of the characters:

“Have you anything to declare?”
 “Wings.”
 “Have you worn them?”
 “Sure.”
 “That’s all right, then.”
 “Divine Discontent gets all the smiles all the time,” complained Fortitude to Prudence.
 “Golly, but it’s good to be on dry land.”
 Unsteadily, but with renewed hope, the passengers had disembarked.
 Father Rothschild fluttered a diplomatic laissez-passer and disappeared in the large car that had been sent to meet him. The others were jostling one another with their luggage, trying to attract the Customs officers and longing for a cup of tea.²³

The angelic sisters and the fragments of information and conversation are straight from Firbank, producing a disorientating structural humor. It was a kind of humor that Waugh would draw on in order to present the vapid and conniving world of the “Bright Young Things,” achieving an overall effect that, as Van Vechten notes, was immune to quotation.

Firbank’s importance in the literary scene of the early twentieth century was noted by Waugh’s friend, the influential literary critic Cyril Connolly. The editor of *Horizon*, which he founded, from 1940 to 1949, Connolly was a prolific journalist, but he never made much of a mark as a creative writer; his only novel, *The Rock Pool* (1936), is generally dismissed as a failure. Yet Connolly’s place as a spokesperson for modern literature has been recognized by many, and it is Firbank who holds the central place in his account of the development of modern literature in his study *Enemies of Promise* (1938). Here Connolly argues that Aldous Huxley followed Eliot who followed Firbank and that Firbank “harked back to the dandyism of the seventeenth century.”²⁴ There is of course much to be said for the influence of the literature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period on that of the *fin de siècle* and of the early twentieth century, but here what is crucial is that Connolly starts his genealogy of modern writing with Firbank. Like Van Vechten, Connolly suggests that Firbank “is not epigrammatic, he is not easily quotable, his object was to cast a sheen of wit over his writing” (45). This sheen, though, is not as uniform as it may appear, and Connolly picks up on a difference between Firbank’s dialogue and descriptive prose: “A book by Firbank is in the nature of a play where passages of descriptive prose correspond to stage directions” (48). If Firbank’s aesthetic stands out, it is nevertheless far removed from the aesthetic of high modernism, and Connolly is quick to make a distinction between Firbank and Eliot:

There are places when I miss Firbank, in Knightsbridge or Rome, in an autumnal cathedral city; there are remarks one overhears or whole scenes between simple, fatuous, complacent people when one recognises the artist who could best have done them justice is no more. But there exists a mood for whose expression we must thank Eliot, the mood of dissatisfaction and despondency, of barrenness and futility (53).

600 This mood of futility was, according to Connolly, dominant in the 1920s and suffused the work of many we may now regard as high modernists. Connolly makes a distinction between the “new Mandarins,” as he terms them, who dominated from 1918 to 1928—James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, the Sitwells, and Huxley—and the “new realists,” who dominated from 1928 to 1938. The work of Firbank does not fit into either of these groupings, and that is perhaps the reason why his fiction can function as an alternative to both. Waugh, drawing on Firbank’s ability to capture the fatuous and complacent, was also drawing on the influence of decadence. Firbank’s work may have updated decadence for the 1910s and 1920s, but at its heart was a desire to recapture the spirit of the 1890s.

“The Great Booby”: Waugh and Wilde

Firbank’s neodecadent aesthetic was not, however, the most conspicuous attempt to revive, or resurrect, the days of 1895 during the late 1920s. A revival of decadence was most notably signaled in the increasing number of performances of Wilde’s social comedies. Many of these had been staged in the early years of the century—*The Importance of Being Earnest* returned to London stages as early as 1902, *Lady Windemere’s Fan* in 1904, and *A Woman of No Importance* in 1907—but as time passed there were also several attempts to “update” the plays, most notable of which was Allan Aynesworth’s 1923 production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the Theatre Royal Haymarket, which gave the play a fashionable, 1920s air—largely by dressing the cast in the latest fashions. Aynesworth had played Algernon Moncrieff in the original premiere of the play in 1895, and his attempts to modernize it were not universally admired. Indeed, the general press response was disdain. As a rather stinging review in the *Observer* put it, “Time has taken the curl out of many of the epigrams, and they cannot be brought up to date merely by the ladies of the cast wearing the latest from Curzon Street.”²⁵ In a rather odd twist the purported spirit of Oscar Wilde reviewed the production, which he saw through the medium Hester Travers Smith. Wilde requested that Smith teach him something of the present time: “It seems to me to be so far removed from mine. The world of London looks as if it had cast off all its beautiful clothing and adopted the grimy garments of the artisan. . . . The whole theatre wore a ‘useful’ aspect that night.”²⁶ Clearly Wilde didn’t take to Cecily dressed as a flapper. As Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell have suggested, the 1923 production represented for Wilde’s plays “a crisis of style that was also a crisis of meaning.”²⁷

The 1930 production of the same play, directed by Nigel Playfair and featuring a young John Gielgud as John Worthing, was an abstract, almost surreal version. The set and costumes were designed in a striking black and white that was obviously indebted to Aubrey Beardsley, Edmund J. Sullivan, and the other illustrators of the 1890s. It is this production that Waugh had most certainly read about even if he hadn’t seen it, and it is most likely one of the targets of his attack on the revival of the nineties in 1930. In a short article on Wilde for *Harper’s Bazaar*, Waugh expresses his exasperation with

the current vogue for all things nineties. Yet it was not the decade that troubled Waugh so much as the way it had become shorthand for the work of one man:

The Nineties have come to mean for us only one thing—the great booby figure of Oscar Wilde. Even he was by no means as comic as his admirers have made him. He was overdressed, pompous, snobbish, sentimental and vain, but he had an undeniable flair for the possibilities of the contemporary, commercial theatre. He got himself into trouble, poor old thing, by the infringement of a very silly law, which was just as culpable and just as boring as the infringement of traffic or licensing regulations. For the rest of his life he became a professional sponge. But it is this unremarkable figure that has become the type to which the new fashion is tending. It is natural that one of the first signs of the new movement should have been the revival of his plays. No one can object to this, because they are in their strictly limited way perfectly competent works. The sad thing for poor Wilde's reputation was that, in the grim social circles which he wished to penetrate, anything that was not Politics or Sport was Art. If he wore scent, or jewellery, or eccentric waistcoats, or collected knick-knacks of porcelain or chinoiserie—it was all Art. If he lay a long time on a sofa in a silk dressing gown—that was Art, too. Wilde went bowling all over the country to lecture about Art. He even persuaded himself that he suffered for Art.²⁸

It is a savage attack not just on Wilde but on the very aesthetic principles that underpinned much of the nineties, namely what Michael Foldy has dubbed an “ontological aestheticism.”²⁹ Turning life into art was something Waugh could never abide. For Waugh, art was far more attuned to social critique and satire, an enterprise that took seriously the role of the artist in challenging the excesses and ills of modernity. Waugh's rejection of Wilde is also a rejection, as he outlines elsewhere, of the ways in which the complexities of literary history could be reduced to labels such as “the Nineties” or “the Thirties.”³⁰ Always the contrarian, Waugh suggested we should return to the true modernity of the 1890s—the bicycle, the telephone, the motor car—and to its masculine heroes of empire: General Kitchener, Rudyard Kipling, and W. G. Grace. It is hard to take Waugh's conclusions seriously, and it seems that his essay is written with tongue firmly in cheek. Yet elsewhere in his writing of this period we see a satire of aestheticism and the nineties. In *Decline and Fall* (1928), Paul Pennyfather ponders whether poor old Grimes has actually died: “Surely he had followed in the Bacchic train of distant Arcady, and played on the reeds of myth by forgotten streams, and taught the childish satyrs the art of love?”³¹ In *Vile Bodies*, Adam Fenwick-Symes, relating his attempts to create a craze for the green bowler hat, notes that a famous London milliner recalled one of his customers who used to dye his carnations green (98). Clearly the affectation of the 1890s, manifested in the incessant novelty of the “Bright Young Things,” is being mocked here.

If Waugh was appalled by the resurrection of decadence as the height of modernity, it was only a few years before Wilde's plays definitively became historical drama. This shift was, according to Kaplan and Stowell, heralded by the 1939 production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, directed by John Gielgud. Having seen at firsthand the damage modernization could do in the 1930 Playfair production, Gielgud returned the play to its historical setting—1895—and claimed that it could not be staged any

602 later than 1906. The reason for this was that the play no longer worked as a satire of its contemporary culture and therefore of the audience watching it: “Today we laugh at the very idea that such types could ever have existed; at the whole system—the leaving of cards, chaperons, official proposals of marriage, the ceremony of meals, the ridiculously exaggerated values of birth, rank, and fashion.”³² Another relatively unnoticed event again suggests that the radical energy of the nineties had now been exhausted. In 1940, a new Westminster Hymnal, the committee for which was led by Waugh’s good friend the Reverend Ronald Knox, included poetry by decadent writers Lionel Johnson and “Michael Field” set to music.³³ It had taken forty-five years for Wilde and the other decadent writers to lose their modernity, and it was now that a friendly, if condescending, olive branch could be extended to the 1890s by Evelyn Waugh.

“A Pure Aesthete”: Waugh’s Wartime Aestheticism

In an interview for the BBC’s *Face to Face* program in 1960, Waugh responded to John Freeman’s suggestion that he had drifted from the aestheticism of his Oxford days with indignation: “I’m still a pure aesthete. In middle life one doesn’t have to dress up in special clothes to enjoy architecture, you know.”³⁴ Waugh’s claim to be an aesthete suggested that he had begun to distance the love of art for its own sake from the fashionable signifiers of modernity that had accompanied it. To be an aesthete in 1960 was to be out of time, a position that, particularly later in life, Waugh reveled in. That is not to say that he embraced the values of the 1890s but that he saw them as being less antithetical to his own conservative valorization of art and literature. He was certainly not alone in donning sympathetic—if somewhat condescending—rose-tinted spectacles. His friend and contemporary John Betjeman famously eulogized the aging Arthur Symons in his 1940 poem “On Seeing an Old Poet in the Café Royal :

I saw him in the Café Royal,
Very old and very grand.
Modernistic shone the lamplight
There in London’s fairyland.³⁵

Symons’s work had, by the late 1930s, truly become a relic of the past, a shabby modernism that seemed completely out of step with a world again on the verge of total war. He was not the only relic of the nineties who lived through the 1920s and ’30s. Max Beerbohm was a constant presence in London’s artistic and theater scenes right up until his death in 1956, and Reggie Turner would appear across the Continent, ever keen to reminisce on the last days of Wilde. According to the novelist, historian, and all-round dilettante Harold Acton, “in spite of his efforts to keep up to date” Turner “never escaped from the ‘nineties altogether.”³⁶ But reminders of the nineties were everywhere, and Acton himself struggled to escape from their shadow. In entitling the first part of his autobiography *Memoirs of an Aesthete* (1948), Acton knew he would have to struggle to divest that term of its nineteenth-century baggage: “I am aware of

its ludicrous connotations in England, owing to the late Victorian movement which parodied and falsified its meaning. But I was born in the twentieth century, which is closer to the ninth than the nineteenth, and I belong to no special movement" (2). We should, perhaps, take Acton's protestations as disingenuous, as too keen to invoke a radical break from the late Victorian period when he was so clearly indebted to it. Yet given the tumultuous events of the previous ten years it was understandable that, like Symonds writing in the wake of World War I, he couldn't see the relevance of the aestheticism of the 1890s.

Acton's rejection of aestheticism as antithetical to a world that had suffered two unimaginable wars was hardly shared by Waugh, and it was in the first few years of the Second World War, at which time it was known as the "Phony War" or "Great Bore War," that he wrote *Put Out More Flags*. This novel, often neglected in criticism, arguably marks the final stage of his Firbankian style; his characteristic satiric tone is replaced after this novel with the great sentimentality of *Brideshead Revisited* and the *Sword of Honour* trilogy. *Put Out More Flags* plots the adventures of raconteur and fop Basil Seal, who had earlier appeared in *Black Mischief* (1932), and the incorrigible aesthete Ambrose Silk. It is Silk, along with the poet Parsnip and their circles, that provides Waugh with the greatest vehicle for his satire of the 1890s. Silk is an aesthete out of time, considered by the Marxist artist Poppet Green and her friends "as a survival from the *Yellow Book*."³⁷ In a tragic passage of self-reflection, Silk contemplates his own failure: "Beddoes had died in solitude, by his own hand; Wilde had been driven in to the shadows, tipsy and garrulous, but, to the end, a figure of tragedy looking big in his own twilight. But Ambrose, thought Ambrose, what of him? Born after his time, in age which made a type of him, a figure of farce" (42). Silk has not been granted the tragic early death of a Wilde or Beddoes that confers greatness on the artist. The aging Silk had followed the "primrose path" of art: "At Eton he had collected Lovat Frazer rhyme sheets; at Oxford he had recited *In Memoriam* through a megaphone to an accompaniment hummed on combs and tissue paper; in Paris he had frequented Jean Cocteau and Gertrude Stein. . . . That way the primrose path led gently downhill to the world of fashionable photographers" (43). This trajectory is strikingly similar to that of the much more famous aesthete of Waugh's work, Anthony Blanche of *Brideshead Revisited*. These two characters were both based, Waugh tells us, on Brian Howard. While Waugh suggests Howard had a "ferocity of elegance that belonged to the romantic era of a century before" (*A Little Learning*, 205), one look at Howard's only collection of poetry, *God Save the King* (1931), suggests he was far more imbued with the spirit of the fin de siècle, as well as rather obviously indebted to T. S. Eliot, the volume coming equipped with epigraphs from Rimbaud and Baudelaire and some rather questionable neodecadence ("I have two loves, and one is the terrible night/the cannibal carnation, the soft storm/beautiful, blind and black, invisible, alive and dead/the carnation face, the lullaby, the kindest poison, the prison").³⁸ Waugh was clearly no fan of Howard and of the affected aestheticism he represented, yet there is something far more affectionate in the portrait of Ambrose Silk than has often been recognized.

604 It is in the Café Royal, that bastion of decadence, that Ambrose Silk feels a certain peace: “The Café Royal, perhaps because of its distant associations with Oscar and Aubrey, was one of the places where Ambrose preened himself, spread his feathers and felt free to take wing” (174). From Waugh’s diaries we know that in 1924 he was sent a copy of Arthur Symons’s *The Café Royal and Other Essays* (Waugh, *Diaries*, 192). The central essay reveals the Café Royal to be a glamorous sanctuary as well as a space that affords an opportunity for reflection and speculation. In his impressionist style, Symons relates a conversation that, in its disconnect from life, reveals the limits of the separation between art and life: “And the mirrors seemed to surround us like the cold limits of the visible, showing us, wherever we looked, only ourselves and our fellows: a brilliant light, a crowd, an hour’s pastime.”³⁹ The self-congratulatory atmosphere of the Café Royal and the endless self-reflection of decadence is no longer something that Waugh feels the need to critique; these belong to a bygone era and can now be wistfully recalled. As a refugee from the vulgarity of the twentieth century, Ambrose Silk emerges as an increasingly likable figure for Waugh. His excesses are lampooned, but ultimately his futile gesture of defiance takes on a certain nobility. Between the “Marxian Jerusalem” advocated by Poppet Green, Pimpernell, and the other young radicals clearly modeled on the Auden group and an out-of-time aestheticism, it is clear where Waugh’s loyalties lie. Silk can arguably perceive the fall of European culture more clearly than any of the other characters. It is also clear that the battle against Auden, Spender, and others still needed to be fought.

If *Put Out More Flags* is marked by an affectionate satire of the afterlives of the 1890s, only a few years later in *Brideshead Revisited* the tone becomes deeply nostalgic, as Waugh recalls a world, and particularly an Oxford, that seems impervious to the destruction that is to come. It is a novel shot through with references to the literature of the fin de siècle. From Rex Mottram’s bejeweled tortoise, straight out of Joris-Karl Huysmans’s “breviary of the decadence,” *A rebours* (1884), to Charles’s engraving of “Et in Arcadia Ego” on a skull, which arguably cites Beardsley’s picture of that title, published in the final volume of the *Savoy* (1896) (in addition to Poussin’s painting of the same title, 1637–38), the references to decadence and aestheticism are many.⁴⁰

The character of Charles Ryder is largely autobiographical, yet the differences in aesthetic development are telling. When Waugh went up to Oxford in 1922 there were, he notes, “traditional aesthetes who still survived here and there in the twilight of the 90s.” In *A Little Learning*, Waugh suggests that his “tastes were somewhat of this kind” until Harold Acton, with his avant-garde, cosmopolitan sensibilities, led Waugh toward the modernism of T. S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein (197). There are no surviving diaries from the Oxford years, making it more difficult to reconstruct Waugh’s own dalliances with aestheticism, yet it is telling that in *Brideshead Revisited* Charles Ryder undergoes a reverse conversion. He confesses that when he went up to Oxford his tastes were of the intellectual-by-numbers Bloomsbury type. His room is adorned with a reproduction of Van Gough’s *Sunflowers*, a screen painted by Roger Fry from the Omega workshops, and a book collection that is “meagre and commonplace”: Roger Fry’s *Vision and Design*, A. E. Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad*, Strachey’s *Eminent Vic-*

torians, Compton McKenzie's *Sinister Street*, Norman Douglas's *South Wind*.⁴¹ While this is the sad reality, Charles would like to endow his youth "with a false precocity" and to pretend that his rooms are "decorated with Morris stuffs and Arundel prints" and that his shelves are "filled with seventeenth-century folios and French novels of the second empire in Russia-leather and watered-silk" (19-20). This interior design suggests that Charles now, during World War II, sees himself as a devotee of the 1890s. His "conversion to the baroque" at *Brideshead* is also a conversion to aestheticism, and his first steps toward it take place in the Brideshead chapel:

The whole interior had been gutted, elaborately refurnished and redecorated in the arts and crafts style of the last decade of the nineteenth century. Angels in printed cotton smocks, rambler-roses, flower-spangled meadows, frisking lambs, texts in Celtic script, saints in armour, covered the walls in an intricate patter of clear, bright colours. . . . The sanctuary lamp and all the metal furniture were of bronze, hand-beaten to the patina of a pock-marked skin; the altar steps had a carpet of grass-green, strewn with white and gold daisies.

"Golly," I said. (28-29)

The description here makes it clear that Waugh had in mind Madresfield Court, whose chapel was redecorated early in the twentieth century by members of the Birmingham Municipal School of Arts and Crafts. The lamp, such an important symbol in the novel, was designed by Arthur and Georgie Gaskin, the latter of whom produced woodcut illustrations for William Morris's Kelmscott Press in the 1890s. In the novel, the survival of the chapel, untouched by the war, is symbolic of not just the true faith of the Roman Catholic Church but of the elevation of art to the status of religion. The novel is, after all, a tribute to the "builders and tragedians" without whom Charles would never have encountered either art or religion (278). Those builders, the artisanal craftspeople of the Birmingham Group, represent the aesthetic ideals of the 1890s in their final form in Waugh's body of work.

While recent historicist criticism has helped us to understand the literary culture of the fin de siècle with much greater depth and clarity, our knowledge of its posthumous lives still requires much careful analysis. The 1890s shape-shifted for Evelyn Waugh, as he continually revisited the period over the course of his writing career. His fascination with, dismissal of, and begrudging respect for the 1890s has been, like the attitude of his near-contemporaries Eliot and Pound, both influential in the posthumous understanding of the 1890s and misunderstood. "The aesthetic and social codes of another generation," Waugh once said in reference to the 1890s, "are always instructive," but the rewriting of those codes is perhaps more instructive still ("Let Us Return to the Nineties but Not to Oscar Wilde," 21). Waugh's continual revisiting of the aesthetic codes of the fin de siècle invites us to revisit the ways in which the literature of the early twentieth century shaped and obscured decadence and aestheticism in the literary and popular imaginary.

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1. Evelyn Waugh, *A Little Learning* (London: Penguin, 1983), 95.
2. Michael Davy notes this in *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh* (London: Phoenix, 2009), 18.
3. Jonathan Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011), 70–80.
4. Christine Berberich, *The Image of the Gentleman in Twentieth-Century Literature* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 102.
5. Andrew Eastham, *Aesthetic Afterlives: Irony, Literary Modernity and the Ends of Beauty* (London: Continuum, 2011), 152–72.
6. Martin Green, *Children of the Sun: A Narrative of Decadence in England after 1918* (London: Pimlico, 1992).
7. Simon Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (Athens: Ohio State University Press, 2007), 56.
8. Early work focused on the sexual politics of Wilde; see, for instance, Alan Sinfield's *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (London: Cassell, 1994). This was followed by a much more sophisticated examination of effeminacy and style in Joseph Bristow's important *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing after 1885* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). More recently the study of Wilde's legacy has taken a more historicist and international focus in Stefano Evangelista's edited volume *The Reception of Oscar Wilde in Europe* (London: Continuum, 2010), which includes a valuable essay by Bristow on the reception of Wilde in England. Dan Novak has also recently provided an excellent example of the depth and care than can be taken in mapping discrete and important moments of reception; see his "Picturing Wilde: Christopher Millard's 'Iconography of Oscar Wilde,'" *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 32, no. 4 (2010): 305–35.
9. The accounts of this development are numerous. We can perhaps take David Weir's account as representative. He argues that decadence must be read as a "transition" between romanticism and modernism (*Decadence and the Making of Modernism* [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995], xvi). Recent books offer a much more complex articulation of the relationship between decadence and modernism, as well as the "post-Victorian" manifestations of decadence. See Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), and Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
10. Many of the poems in *A Lume Spento* (1908) bear all the hallmarks of decadence. The line between parody and homage is, as Marion Thain suggests ("Modernist 'Homage' to the 'Fin de siècle,'" *Yearbook of English Studies* 37, no. 1 [2007]: 22–40), hard to distinguish, but "The Decadence," "Nicotine, a Hymn to the Dope," and "In Tempore Senectutis" are all poems in question. See Ezra Pound, *Collected Early Poems*, ed. Michael John King (New York: New Directions, 1976), 7–52. For an in-depth study of the early Pound, see Niclas Christoph John de De Nagy, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound: The Pre-Imagist Stage* (Bern: Francke, 1960), 54–104. For more recent analysis, see Robert Stark, *Ezra Pound's Early Verse and the Lyric Tradition: A Jargoner's Apprenticeship* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).
11. Ronald Bush, "In Pursuit of Wilde Possum: Reflections on Eliot, Modernism, and the Nineties," *Modernism/Modernity* 11, no. 3 (2004): 469–85.
12. Victor Plarr, "To My Old Friend," in *The Collected Poems of Victor Plarr*, ed. Ian Fletcher (London: Eric and Joan Stevens, 1974), 145–46.
13. A. J. A. Symonds, introduction to *An Anthology of "Nineties" Verse* (London: Elin Matthews and Marrot, 1928), xviii.
14. See Joseph Bristow, introduction to *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend* (Athens: Ohio State University Press, 2008), 1–45.
15. Vyvyan B. Holland, "Ronald Firbank," in *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir*, ed. Ifan Kyrle Fletcher (London: Duckworth, 1930), 109.
16. Carl Van Vechten, *Excavations: A Book of Advocacies* (New York: Knopf, 1926), 172.

17. Evelyn Waugh to Anthony Curtis, July 4, 1962, in *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Mark Amory (London: Phoenix, 2009), 665.
18. Brigid Brophy, "Mr. Waugh's Eschatology," *New Statesman*, September 25, 1964, 450; V. S. Pritchett, "Vanities and Servitudes," *New Statesman*, October 27, 1961, 603.
19. Evelyn Waugh, "Ronald Firbank," *Life and Letters* 2, no. 10 (1929): 192.
20. Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1929), 6–7.
21. Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (Paris: Lemerre, 1891), 25. Translation by Nancy O'Connor, www.nereview.com/30-2/Bourget.htm.
22. Interview with Julian Jebb, *Paris Review*, no. 30 (Summer/Fall 1963): 73–85.
23. Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (London: Penguin, 1996), 19.
24. Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (London: Penguin, 1961), 45.
25. Quoted in Robert Tanitch, *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen* (London: Methuen, 1999), 266.
26. Hester Travers Smith, *Oscar Wilde From Purgatory: Psychic Messages* (New York: Henry Holt, 1926), 167. For a recent study of Wilde's ghost, see Elisha Cohn, "Oscar Wilde's Ghost: The Play of Imitation," *Victorian Studies* 54, no. 3 (2012): 474–85.
27. Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, "The Dandy and the Dowager: Oscar Wilde and Audience Resistance," *New Theatre Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1999): 329.
28. Evelyn Waugh, "Let Us Return to the Nineties but Not to Oscar Wilde," in Evelyn Waugh, *A Little Order: Selected Journalism*, ed. Donat Gallagher (London: Penguin, 2010), 21.
29. Michael Foldy, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde: Deviance, Morality, and Late Victorian Society* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 98.
30. See the beginning of Waugh's savage review of Stephen Spender's *World within World* from 1951 in *A Little Order*, 90.
31. Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall* (London: Penguin, 2001), 185.
32. John Gielgud, quoted in Kaplan and Stowell, "The Dandy and the Dowager," 330.
33. Evelyn Waugh, *The Life of Right Reverend Ronald Knox* (London: Penguin, 2012), 243.
34. Evelyn Waugh, "Face to Face," BBC, June 26, 1960.
35. John Betjemen, *Collected Poems* (London: John Murray, 2006), 48.
36. Harold Acton, *Memoirs of an Aesthete* (London: Methuen, 1948), 105.
37. Evelyn Waugh, *Put Out More Flags* (London: Penguin, 1943), 35.
38. Brian Howard, *God Save the King* (Paris: Hours Press, 1931), 34.
39. Arthur Symons, "The Café Royal," in *The Café Royal and Other Essays* (London: Beaumont Press, 1923), 7.
40. On Waugh's citation of Huysmans, see G. A. Cevasco, *The Breviary of the Decadence: J.-K. Huysmans's "A Rebours" and English Literature* (New York: AMS Press, 2001), 184–85.
41. Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1949), 20.